

# Under Milk Wood: An Experiment in Student Leadership

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## Introduction

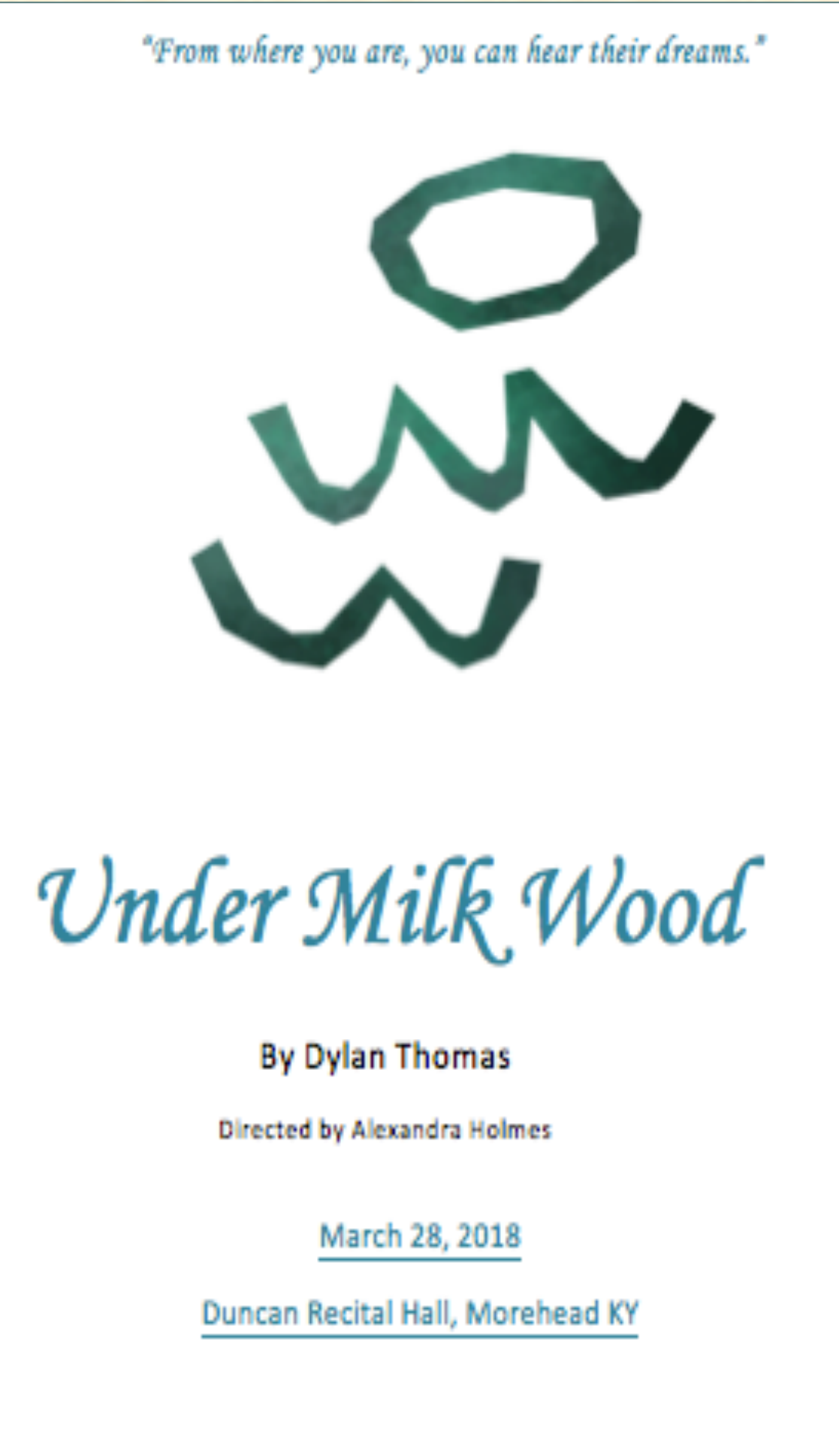
Not many people are familiar with the term “A Play for Voices.” This form of performance media does not rely on physical acting or visual aids in order to convey its message to an audience, but rather makes use of audio cues and dynamic voice acting to create an enthralling experience. A useful metaphor to describe the idea of a play for voices might be that of a “live podcast.” A group of voice actors are seated in front of an audience, and perform a dramatic reading of the script with no acting or props to accompany the dialogue. In this age of fast-paced, electronic, and very visually-oriented pastimes such as television streaming sites, social media, and video games, more traditional art forms such as the play for voices are in danger of fading away from public attention completely.

## Research Objective

The goal of this project was to accomplish three things. The first, to observe whether a student with no official background in theatre would be capable of organizing, casting, directing, and performing in a play for voices with little interference from a qualified staff member. Second, to discover whether students would respect and listen to the instruction of an underclassman director who holds less experience in theatre than they do. Third, to challenge the idea that the public is losing interest in non-visual art by creating and advertising a show that drew in a substantial number of audience members to the final performance.

## Play Synopsis/Playbill Cover

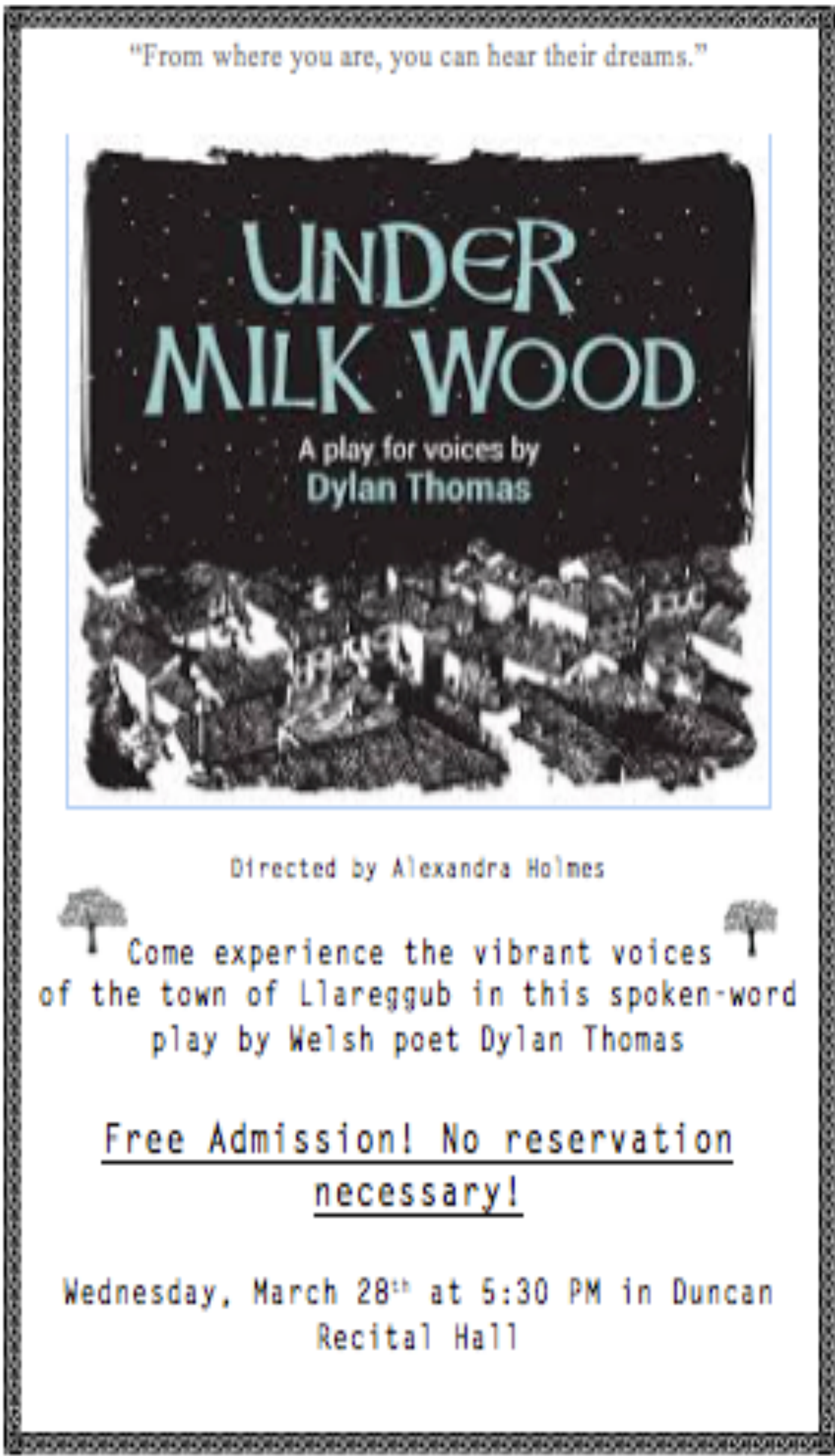
Under Milk Wood is a 1954 radio drama written by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, commissioned by the BBC and later adapted for the stage. In this play, an omniscient narrator invites the audience to listen to the dreams, desires, and innermost thoughts of the inhabitants of the fictional Welsh fishing town of Larreggub (bugger-all, spelled backwards). Audience members experience the mundane, familiar, completely strange daily lives of such characters as Captain Cat, the retired blind sea captain haunted by his seafaring days; Mrs. Ogmore Pritchard, relentlessly nagging her two deceased husbands, Polly Garter, who longs for her dead lover, and Reverend Eli Jenkins, who praises music above all else.



## Process: Casting, Rehearsal, Performance

In late November of 2017, student auditions were held for Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices, and student director Alexandra Holmes then selected seven volunteer cast members as well as herself from the auditioners to perform as the characters of Under Milk Wood. Since there are over 50 speaking roles in Under Milk Wood, each cast member was responsible for approximately 8 roles apiece, meaning that the ability to distinguish the voice of one character from another was crucial to the audience’s understanding of the plot. Once-weekly rehearsals began in early February of the 2018 Spring semester, and Ms. Holmes worked with the cast to develop the voices of the characters and polish the flow and pacing of the dialogue. During and after each rehearsal, Ms. Holmes took notes on cast performance, and individually discussed methods of improvement with any cast member that she felt had encountered a problem with the script. Dr. Philip Krummrich, while leaving the vast majority of creative control to the students, provided helpful advice on how best to modify the script for an audience of Morehead citizens, and secured a venue for the final performance. Flyers advertising the play were created and distributed two weeks prior to the performance, and 50 programs were designed and printed by Ms. Holmes with the assistance of Dr. Krummrich. Eli Weis and Tristan Hinkle, two members of the cast who were also involved with the Morehead State music department, were able to locate and obtain chimes and a musical triangle to be used for sound effects during the performance. The performance took place on March 28, 2018 in Duncan Recital Hall on the Morehead State campus.

## “Under Milk Wood” Promotional Flyer



## Cast Photo



The cast of Under Milk Wood, from left to right: Haley Fecher, Elizabeth DeBord, Eli Weis, Alexandra Holmes, Lydia Kabzinski, Robert Freeman, Kristen Ammons, Tristan Hinkle

## About the Playwright



Born in 1914, Welshman Dylan Thomas left school at age 16 to become a reporter and writer. His most famous poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," was published in 1952, but his reputation was solidified years earlier. Thomas's prose includes *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (1954) and *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (1955). Thomas, well-known for his sensual quality of language and themes of loss of innocence, childhood nostalgia, and death, was in high demand for his animated readings. However, debt and heavy drinking took their toll, and he died in New York City while on tour in 1953, at age 39.

## Results/Conclusions

Throughout every rehearsal, cast members remained professional and respectful towards Ms. Holmes and took her criticisms seriously, despite the fact that she was younger and much less experienced in music and theatre than many of them. Cast attendance at rehearsals was high, and communication with the director was efficient and courteous. After the performance, audience attendance was tallied by counting the flyers that had not been taken by audience members. There were no flyers left, indicating that attendance had been higher even than the original estimate. The completion of the project suggests success in each of the three goals stated in the Research Objective box.